The Responsibilities of Churchmanship
January 11, 1970 - Ordination and Installation
II Corinthians 5:16-20

The trouble with this sermon is that there is an assumption in the title that few people accept. "The Responsibilities of Churchmanship": it would be totally naive to begin, herewith, a catalog of those duties and responsibilities when, in fact, a lot of people, if not the majority, simply don't accept the proposition that belonging to the church has anything whatever to do with duties and responsibilities.

That statement is so fundamentally and frustratingly true that it requires a minimum of documentation. If you have ever tried to recruit workers for any project in this congregation, you know it is true. The Church is simply not included in that list of personal priorities which all of us have. In fact, the Church is the only organization in society in which it is possible to hold membership and contribute nothing for its support, attend none of its meetings and participate in none of its activities.

But rather than using our time this morning describing the obvious, I would have us think about how this has happened. How has an institution, founded on the principles of one who said "take up your cross and follow", come to be so totally and completely undisciplined?

I think the reasons are two. The first is that Protestantism has always overreacted to a type of churchly authority that disappeared in the 16th century. The Protestant Reformation, at least in part, was a grassroots rebellion against a very tight, authoritarian system of church government. In the middle ages the church was totally dominated by its clergy. People obeyed. People did what their priests told them to do at the threat of excommunication and eternal damnation. The Reformation changed that. Individual freedom became the by-word. The priesthood of all believers its theological base. People were personally responsible for their faith. Protestantism, and particularly Presbyterianism, still lives by that understanding. But men being men, we chose to accent the freedom inherent in that understanding and to ignore the equally important responsibility. Too frequently the result is a churchmanship completely without meaning. Or to bring it closer to

home - local congregations that number people on their rolls who have not been seen for lo, these many years.

The other reason is cultural. We are part of a national mentality that regards individual freedom very highly. As a people we have fought and died, and continue to do so when we are convinced that we are doing battle for freedom. But the other side of our law for freedom is a dislike of discipline. Wallace Fisher has noted that the American "questions any authority which limits his freedom unless he can see that it benefits him directly. The American- individualistic, idealistic, experimental, pragmatic, inventive - reacts immediately to authority: 'O yeah! Who says so?" [P.37-38 Preface to Parish Renewal] de Tocqueville, a sympathetic European, long ago pin pointed this as a dangerous failure in the American character. W. T. Brogan found the same to be true in the 1950's. [The American Character] We love freedom: but we don't always willingly accept the responsibilities that accompany our freedom - and upon which our freedom depends.

I've only been a resident of Lafayette for three and one half years, but in that relatively brief time I have perceived that the primary political motivator here is fear and distrust and dislike for the authority of the federal government. We are apparently obsessed with the imagined threat of federal authority: content to mouth platitudes about individual freedom and initiative, while doing nothing to remedy those conditions which must be improved, such as urban renewal, housing and public health. It is, of course, a noble and creative thing to "do it alone": to exercise one's individual freedom in ways that eliminate the need for big government's infringements upon our common life. But it is something else to talk about it and then do nothing: to talk incessantly of freedom and never get around to exercising the responsibilities that are part of our freedom.

In any case, these two, our Reformation distrust of ecclesiastical authority, and our cultural heritage of individual liberty without individual responsibility, work together to create a debilitating, frustrating impasse within the Church of Jesus Christ. And until we work this thing out: until we come to some common understanding of church membership as a combination of freedom withing the grace

of God, and responsibility for the mission of the church the problem is not likely to go away.

One thing is clear. The New Testament portrays the church intterms of both privilege and duty: grace and discipline: faith and action. The early churchmen knew nothing of an institution that made no demands. To belong, to them, meant to be a part of a tightly knit communion of people who knew themselves called to be in mission. There was no other reason for their corporate existence.

In our New Testament lesson this morning Paul penned perhaps one of his more important paragraphs. It is significant that the letters to the Corinthians were written to a group of people who were having some rather severe internal problems precisely at this point of freedom and responsibility.

In Jesus Christ, Paul said, a man becomes a new creation. The newness - the new being - is a state of reconciliation between God and man. Before, men were separated from God by reason of their own will, their ego, their self-centeredness. Paul called it Sin. All men are caught in it - living their lives out of harmony with the one who created them. But Jesus Christ changes that. By trusting in him: by willfully laying down the past, by living in dependence on his forgiveness and grace - a man becomes something entirely new: life is lived in harmony with God: God and man are at one. That is the reconciliation affected by Jesus Christ. Time has not changed that. It is still the good news: it is still the power at work on the Church and we must never forget it.

But Paul didn't stop there. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself - - and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." The key word is reconciliation: the bringing together of those who are separated: the healing of the breach. And here Paul clearly is saying that Christ did it - and because of that this reconciling activity is what the Church of Jesus Christ is all about. That's what the Church is: the community of those individuals who have experienced their at-oneness with God: and who are experiencing their at-oneness with each other; and who are totally devoted to sharing that miracle by working for reconciliation across all the barriers which separate men from other men.

That adds up to freedom - and responsibility: that adds up to a burden placed on the shoulders of anyone who dares to be a part of this blessed community. It adds up to quite a contrast to the church as we know it.

I think we can be helped as we consider the responsibilities of belonging to this congregation in this place if we follow the logic of Martin Marty, a Lutheran Church Historian and Theologian. Part of our problem, Marty maintains, [Second Chance forAmerican Protestantism] is in the basic structure of the Church - the congregation - or parish. The Church as a parish is a concept that grew out of fourth century England. A parish was basically a unit of geography. Since, at that time belonging to a church was not a matter of choice or personal preference, everyone who lived in a given geographical place was part of the parish. Thus the Church became the spiritual, and many time political and economic focal point of life for people who lived and worked together and who sooner or later were related to each other.

In early America the parish or congregational unit functioned very well, tailor-made for a rural, small town civilization. The problem is that the style has not changed, but everything else has. There is no such thing in Protestantism as a parish: that is to say, geographical proximity has very little to do with your choice of church, or who your fellow members happen to be. In addition the congregational unit which evolved in a stable society now has to deal with instability and fluidity. Members are here today and gone tomorrow. People can join, attend, move away, without the majority of other members ever being aware of their existence.

That alone has tremendous implications if we are going to take seriously the concept of reconciliation. For it is a little difficult to be reconciled to someone you've never seen, and it is very difficult to get excited about the Church's mission of reconciliation in a community you will soon be leaving. At best the Church becomes the place to go for certain services - such as education for the children and stimulating sermons.

Because of this cultural enigma there are those who have rejected the whole concept of the church as a congregational unit in favor of house churches; small

intimate groups that convene regularly for study, prayer and fellowship. In fact there are responsible voices saying that this will be the form of the Church in the future: that impersonal congregations with unused buildings are obsolete and will gradually fade away.

That may be. But I'm not ready to give up yet. Because I see the congregational unit's greatest weakness as its greatest challenge. I see in the problems of the Parish a reflection of the problems of life in general, and therefore an opportunity for Christian people to engage in the very real work of reconciliation, in a way not afforded by the house church.

It will start when we understand parish not as a place but a bond between people. It will start when we stop defining church as that building on the corner of Vinton and 29th streets, and begin to think in terms of those people with whom we are intimately involved in Jesus Christ. The hope of the parish is that you and I will begin to think in terms of relationships and reconciliation.

That, of course, is quite a bit to ask: and if we are serious about it we must be prepared to confront opposition, an opposition that runs very deeply. If we are not serious about it, we have very little reason to maintain the facade of churchmanship.

It will involve some simple, personal little things, such as taking the time to know each other, caring for and listening to each other, praying with and for each other. It will involve integrity when we celebrate the sacraments - when, for instance, we say in Baptism that we accept the responsibility for the Christian nurture of an infant born to one of us.

It will mean some major changes too: such as acting on our responsibilities as agents of reconciliation - getting involved individually and corporately in all those areas where men are alienated from each other.

That, I believe, is the hope of the Church. But it will never become a reality until a lot of individuals like you and me decide that we are weary of playing religious games - and are ready now to shoulder the responsibilities of churchmanship. No one can force you - all that can be done is the testimony delivered again and

again, that in Jesus Christ - a new creation is taking place - and that the fullness of life is waiting for those who commit themselves to it.

There is an advertisement for a product not ordinarily mentioned within these walls that goes something like this: "You only go around once in life. So grab all the gusto you can."

Well, we do go around only once. And the faith of the Church is that here - in the community of reconciliation - is all the gusto - all the meaning - any man can ask for.

May it begin to be so for us.

Amen

Our father, stir up our reluctant commitment. Give us the courage to begin this year with a new commitment to your church. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen